



Witnessing with Courage: Radical Hope in Etty Hillesum's Diaries

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Abstract— This paper examines the notions of moral fortitude and transformative hope in the diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish writer who lived through the Holocaust. Drawing on Jonathan Lear's concept of "radical hope," understood as a commitment to goodness beyond present comprehension, the study situates Hillesum's writings within an ethical framework shaped by crisis and cultural devastation. Rather than interpreting her optimism as naïve or escapist, the paper argues that Hillesum's response to suffering embodies a conscious, ethically grounded resilience that aligns with an expanded Aristotelian understanding of courage. By distinguishing between mere optimism and ethically rooted hope, the study shows that Hillesum's outlook exemplifies what Lear terms "radical hope", a forward-looking openness to meaning when conventional frameworks collapse. The paper positions Hillesum as a moral witness whose writings offer profound insights into human dignity, ethical responsibility, and the possibility of sustaining meaning under extreme conditions. Her diaries emerge not only as historical testimony but also as philosophical texts that redefine courage and hope in the context of modern catastrophe.



Keywords— Etty Hillesum, Moral Courage, Radical Hope, Jonathan Lear

*To meet death filled with hope--- Henry Real Bird,
Custerology*

"I had visions then of ruined cities. I saw old cities vanish and new cities arise, and I thought to myself, even if the whole of this world is bombed to bits, we shall build a new world, and that one too will pass, and still life will be beautiful, always beautiful. – Etty Hillesum (96)

Dictionary defines hope as "a feeling of expectation or grounds for believing that something good may happen" but hope stops being a feeling and becomes a conscious and difficult decision synonymous with courage and resistance when sported and displayed during the darkest of times. Emily Dickinson calls hope, "a thing with feathers" and rightly so. On the face of devastation of culture and civilisation and as Hannah Arendt calls it, a shaking of "the pillars of the best-known truths", the most natural response would be terror and holding on to a feathered and flitting hope becomes the biggest challenge. American professor and author, Jonathan Lear in his

seminal book, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Devastation* argues that tragic cultural destruction calls for "radical hope" that can only be accessed through Aristotelian courage and being open to forces that work beyond human rationality. This paper looks into the remarkable courage and radical hope of young Holocaust victim, Etty Hillesum as expressed through her diaries and letters. She lived in one of the bleakest times of history and her determination to stay altruistic in the face of cultural and personal devastation has been a surprising element for her readers and researchers alike, making them wonder if the positive approach was a manifestation of her inherent optimistic nature or a conscious decision or a well-maintained façade she tried to bravely keep up or a beautiful combination of all these, which Lear calls radical hope.

Jonathan Lear in his *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* discusses the role of courage, values and ethics in a society and in individuals while faced with utter destruction of a culture and way of life. Lear bases this thesis on the life and experiences of Plenty

Coups, the last great chief of the Indian tribe the Crow Nation. Before his death, talking to a white interviewer, Coups said, "When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened." (2) and this sums up the end of Crow culture and their way of living. Even when faced with the real possibility of being completely stripped of all that they believed in and being completely wiped out, Plenty Coups lead his people with courage and continued to hope against hope that something good would emerge. Lear calls this Radical Hope- "a daunting form of commitment to a goodness in the world that transcends one's current ability to grasp what it is" (100). He calls hope a remarkable human achievement that helps in avoiding despair. For Lear, the issue of hope becomes crucial for an ethical inquiry into life at the horizons of one's understanding and this is the kind of radical hope against hope one finds in the writings of Etty Hillesum.

The entries from the diaries of the Holocaust victim, Etty Hillesum offer us an enlightening glimpse into her beautiful and light-filled mind. Etty Hillesum was a Jewish woman who created through her diaries and personal letters one of the most remarkable texts of our time- a testimony of faith and love written in the darkest hours of modern History. Etty Hillesum was an emancipated, educated and urbane young woman who was an avid reader and aspiring writer, too. She took her degree in law at the University of Amsterdam and later enrolled to learn Slavic languages, philosophy and psychology but her plans were disrupted as World War II had broken out by then. Just before the war she became the assistant of Julius Spier, a famous Jungian Psychoanalyst with whom she developed an intimate relationship. She also worked as a Russian teacher.

Etty Hillesum lived in Amsterdam, Holland and her country had been occupied by Hitler's Nazi forces since May 1940. It was a wrong time and place for a Jew to live and in April 1942, the Nazis launched their first major round up of the Jews with the ultimate aim of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Etty lost her job as a teacher but through the influence of friends got a job as a typist in the Jewish Council. In July, 1942 the Nazis wanted to concentrate all the Jews in Westerbork, a transit camp, which would be the last stop before Auschwitz Death Camp for more than 1, 000,000 Dutch Jews. Etty volunteered to accompany the Jews to Westerbork where she worked in the camp hospital. She resisted the efforts by friends to help her escape and on 7 September 1943 was deported to Auschwitz with her family. As her friend, Jopie Vleerschhouwer would describe later, "she left for the death camp full of life and characteristic sparkling humour, waving a cheerful bye"(xxii). They reached Auschwitz on

10, September 1943 and on the same day her parents were gassed. The Red Cross reported the death of Etty on 30 November 1943. One of her brothers was killed in the camp too, another survived only to die on the way back to Holland.

Etty Hillesum was 27 years old when she started writing her diaries. Written in Eight exercise books, these diary entries unravel the story of the personal growth of a young woman who chose to find life beautiful and meaningful even in the most chaotic of times. Her many letters addressed to friends and family, though describes the horrors of concentration camps, do not fail to reveal as Eva Hoffman puts it: her "light-filled mind and the astonishing internal journey it charts".

Jonathan Lear bases his theory of radical hope on Aristotle's conception of courage but also explores courage as extending beyond the virtue that Aristotle explicitly considered. He defines a courageous person by the framework of five Aristotelian criteria and applies these characteristics to the Crow tribe and their leader Plenty Coups. Lear propounds that even in such extreme circumstances certain forms of human excellence are still possible and rather than arguing for radical hope in isolation, he argues that such hope may play a crucial role in a courageous life.

This paper shall look into the writings of Etty Hillesum to say that she was a courageous person filled with courage and radical hope. The five characteristics of a courageous person as stated by Aristotle and used by Lear in his book are:

1. A courageous person has a proper orientation toward what is shameful and what is fearful.

That is, he grasps what would be truly shameful and he is thereby motivated to avoid it. He also understands what is genuinely fearful "No one is better at understanding what is frightening"— and yet he is nevertheless motivated to act courageously in the face of it. (Radical Hope 109)

Etty Hillesum is a strongly passionate person. She writes in a diary entry, "Cold-blooded, icy objectivity is something my nature prevents me from attaining. I am too full of emotion for that" (40) Though highly intelligent and educated, she sees the world through her emotions and her understanding of her experiences. Thus, both the "shameful" and the "fearful" start for Hillesum from her own life and mind. The very first diary entry talks of shame. She says, "The thoughts in my head are sometimes so clear and so sharp and my feelings so deep, but writing about them comes hard. The main difficulty, I think, is a sense of shame" (3). Her dysfunctional family background, hereditary psychological problems, low self-esteem, inner conflict and overthinking often led her to a state of self-

loathing and shame. Drastic political changes, knowledge of the inevitable destruction of her people, devastation of the culture she grew up in, curbing of rights, shattering of dreams, the impending doom, fear of her own hedonistic streak and fluid sexuality proved fearful for her but the courageous person she was, she nevertheless was motivated to be cheerful and brave in the face of it all.

Etty Hillesum reminds herself that "objectivity is better than swooning in great emotions" (10) and she dreams even in the darkest times to "finish up as an adult, capable of helping other souls who are in trouble, and of creating some sort of clarity through my work for others, for that's what it's really all about" (11). These brave words don't just stop with self-motivation but urged her on to volunteer to Westerbork transit camp, decide against selfish escape and till the end to be the "thinking heart of the barracks" when others were too traumatised and incapable of thinking; someone who cheered others up at the expense of her own health, comfort and life. She knew both the shameful and the fearful with all its intensity but chose to rise above the circumstances.

2. The next criterion to radical hope would be "the courage that aims toward what is fine" (not just guts but aims for fineness) Lear further explains that a cornered animal may fight boldly for survival—but it is acting from instinct. "Human beings too, then, are distressed when angry and take pleasure in retaliating; but people who fight from these motives are effective in fighting, not courageous, since they do not fight because of what is fine or noble, or as correct prescription directs, but from emotion" (110).

In Etty Hillesum, one finds a truly fine and nobly altruistic soul. Finesse is evident in her writing, her way of living and her way of fighting. Even when Jews were getting slaughtered and she was sure of her own destruction, she dares to write, "Indiscriminate hatred is the worst thing there is. It is the sickness of the soul. Hatred does not lie in my nature" (11). She diagnoses the problem of her age: hatred of Germans poisoning everyone's mind. On March 15, 1941, she writes down what she calls a liberating thought that surfaced like a hesitant, tender young blade of grass thrusting through a wilderness of weeds, "if there were only one decent German, then he should be cherished despite that whole barbaric gang and because of that one decent German it is wrong to pour hatred over an entire people" (11).

She fails to find even that one decent soldier and one day when a young Gestapo officer peevishly shouts at her, she writes in her diary that night: "a disgruntled young Gestapo officer yelled at me, but that I felt no indignation, rather a real compassion, and would have liked to ask, "Did you have a very unhappy childhood, has your girlfriend let

you down?" (86) She felt that he looked harassed, driven, sullen and weak and needed help. Etty's courage was something that truly aimed towards fine and sublime.

3. The third Aristotelian criterion for courage is that a courageous person must grasp the situation he or she is in and, through experience, exercise good judgment. (111)

Etty Hillesum was a brilliant and erudite person who liked to start the day on an empty stomach with Hegel and Dostoevsky. Etty Hillesum was not a simpleton or a naïve child who was oblivious of the fascist vortex that was sucking the Dutch Jews into an unprecedented genocide. It was very evident to her that the noose was tightening for the Jews with the occupation of the Nazis. She was very well able to discern the condition of the Jews and she was not in denial. Writing about the predicament of the Jews she writes, "'No Admittance to Jews'. More and more of these boards are appearing all over the place." And in her characteristic tone laced with courage and positivity she continues, "Nevertheless there is still enough room for one to move and live and be happy and play music and love each other" (90).

Sometimes one would suspect that a person's hopefulness is a strategy for averting her gaze and escaping reality. Etty knew what was in store and she writes that she has come to terms with her reality and made her decisions based on fine judgement and longed to be the chronicler of the times too. On July 3, 1942 she writes, "What is at stake is our impending destruction and annihilation, we can have no more illusions about that. They are out to destroy us completely" (153). Still her determination to stay positive doesn't diminish. With clear judgement of the situation, she chooses writing as resistance and her way of fighting back. She writes:

I shall wield this slender fountain pen as if it were a hammer, and my words will have to be so many hammer strokes with which to beat out the story of our fate and of a piece of history as it is and never was before. Not in this totalitarian, massively organized form, spanning the whole of Europe. Still, a few people must survive if only to be chroniclers of this age. I would very much like to become one of their number. (173)

4. The fourth parameter of courage offered by Lear would be that it paradigmatically involves the risk of serious loss and of enduring certain pains.

Etty Hillesum loses everything as the World War II rages on and her world turns upside down. Everything gets taken away from her: her regular and happy life at Amsterdam, her favourite work desk decked with books, flowers and pinecones, her friends, her beloved Spiers, her parents, her health and finally her life but she endured

everything cheerfully and had the courage to continue saying that life is beautiful and meaningful. She says, "In a labour camp I should die within three days. I should lie down and die and still not find life unfair. (160)" Access to her favourite picnic spots and park benches were forbidden, travel by trams were barred, her cycle confiscated, rations became scarce, queues became longer and life more miserable but she writes, "I sometimes bow my head under the great burden that weighs down on me... I grow stronger on the bearing of it, and at the same time feel sure that life is beautiful and worth living and meaningful. Despite everything" (153). Aristotle says that the courageous person is generally thought to be a person who is fearless about a fine death. In Etty Hillesum, the reader finds a truly courageous soul who finds life beautiful and meaningful even in the face of not-so-fine death. The day the "badge of Shame", the Yellow Star was issued she writes, "Never give up, never escape, take everything in, and perhaps suffer, that's not too awful either, but never, never give up" (128) and this courage we find displayed even in her very last postcard thrown out of the cattle-car that proclaimed, "We left the camp singing" (introduction).

5. Bold acts that derive merely from optimism are not themselves courageous is the fifth idea Lear presents as he differentiates between optimism and radical hope (112).

At the time of cultural devastation, the reality a courageous person has to face up takes new and radical dimensions. Plato defined humans as finite erotic beings, who find transcendence through religion and God. Under the influence of Julius Spiers, Etty becomes more spiritually matured and comes to peace with herself. It was through his guidance she started writing a diary to chart her thought process from day to day. As she writes down her life and gains understanding of herself as a finite erotic being, Etty Hillesum's attitude becomes more of radical hope with her determination to stay happy and helpful to others in spite of every pain and loss. As she records the day to day affairs, one finds her getting evolved into an emotionally mature person who moves from Eros to Agape love towards the whole mankind.

When a friend bitterly ponders what is it in human beings that makes them want to destroy others, she argues by saying, "the rottenness in others is in us, too... I see no other solution, I really see no other solution than to turn inward and to root out all the rottenness there. I no longer believe that we can change anything in the world until we have first changed ourselves. And that seems to me the only lesson to be learned from this war". (84) With a saint-like attitude, even in an enemy she could see the man beyond the evil. She says, "what needs eradication is the evil in man, not man himself". Thus, she becomes a

fountainhead of radical altruism, in touch with reality, with herself, and her God. She proudly says, "I find life beautiful and I feel free... I believe in God and I believe in man, and I say so without embarrassment" (145)

For Lear, to be human is necessarily to be a vulnerable risk-taker; to be a courageous human is to be good at it. That is, a courageous person has the psychological resources to face the risks with dignity and to make good judgments in the light of them (123).

The Holocaust, the unprecedented ethnic cleansing and attempt in the annihilation of Jewish people, their culture and memory was the bleakest event of the history of mankind. Etty Hillesum lived through the most turbulent times of genocide, cultural devastation, malnutrition, starvation, disease, confinement and loss of concept. Yet that couldn't corrupt the beautiful and sublime soul and spirit of Etty Hillesum. In her last diary entry, she records, "We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds" (231) Etty's fidelity to hope fits all of Aristotle's hallmarks of courage and she emerges as a beacon of courage and radical hope, who becomes a chronicler and witness of times, something she always wanted to be.

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